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Egypt Says U.S. Arms Fill Iran's Needs

Cairo Avoids Public Criticism of U.S. During Touchy Debt Negotiations

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CAIRO, Dec. 28—Senior Egyptian military officials contend that sophisticated U.S. antitank and anti-aircraft weapons shipped to Iran by the Reagan administration have significantly altered the battlefield balance between Iran and Iraq, filling crucial gaps in Iran's arsenal and increasing its chances to mount a successful "final offensive" in coming months.

That battlefield balance remains untested even though Iran's forces infiltrated and attacked Iraqi emplacements on four islands in the Shatt al Arab waterway last week, leaving hundreds and perhaps thousands dead in two days of fighting.

This assessment also does not take into account the continuing effort by the United States, France and regional powers such as Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia to improve every aspect of Iraq's military capabilities in preparation for the expected offensive.

As one American diplomat in the region said this week, "This has gotten to be a pretty high-tech war."

The Egyptian intelligence assessment has given rise to sharp, private criticism of the United States in Cairo, but according to Egyptian sources, the country's top military commander, Defense Minister Abdul-Halim Abu Ghazala, has advised President Hosni Mubarak that Egypt should avoid condemning the U.S. operation so as not to damage U.S.-Egyptian relations.

Mubarak has voiced only implicit criticism in calling on the United States to take steps to restore its credibility in the Middle East, language that has not offended U.S. Ambassador Frank G. Wisner, according to diplomatic sources.

Egypt's reluctance to take a hard line, in contrast to sharp criticism of the Iran arms sales voiced by Jordan's King Hussein in public and in a stinging private letter to Reagan, has coincided with delicate final negotiations between Cairo and Washington to relieve Egypt's \$4.5 bil-

lion military debt.

The U.S. supply of sophisticated weaponry to Iran, according to one senior Egyptian military official, has addressed crucial battlefield weaknesses that may have contributed to Iran's hesitance to begin its long-awaited "final offensive" in the six-year-old war.

"If you look at Iran's forces, you will find they are facing about 2,000 [top of the line] tanks on the Iraqi side," this official said. "And what has the United States given to Iran—2,008 TOW antitank missiles. Now it is much more able to face this threat."

"In the air war," the official continued, "Iran will never be able to face Iraqi superiority, but what has the United States sold to Iran—245 guidance elements to improve their Hawk [anti-aircraft] missile batteries."

In Washington, officials have disclosed that spare parts for Iran's Air Force also were supplied as part of the covert U.S. arms transfers.

Egyptian intelligence officials say that Iran still faces a number of problems on the battlefield, but improving its capability to defend its estimated 650,000 combat troops from Iraqi tank and bomber attack has been a top priority for Iranian military planners.

With a fresh infusion of U.S. weapons and spare parts, "The Iranians are now in a better position than they were last year" when Iranian troops launched a major offensive in southern Iraq and occupied the Faw Peninsula, the intelligence official said.

At the time of that offensive, the United States covertly had been supplying Iraq with detailed information from U.S. spy satellites about Iranian troop strength and movements along the 750-mile battlefield, according to a well-informed U.S. official.

This official, however, said that one of the problems with sharing high-technology systems with the combatants is that the United States tends to get the blame for

battlefield failures.

In the Faw campaign, Iraq bitterly blamed the United States in private for providing faulty satellite intelligence on Iran's strength in the south. "The fact is, the Iraqis caved at Faw," this official said.

The Egyptian assessment of the Persian Gulf war concludes that Iran "is still obliged to launch a big offensive," said one high-ranking Egyptian officer. With Iranian financial reserves at an all-time low—Egypt estimates an 18-month supply of cash—and renewed commitments to support Iraq coming from gulf states and the West, "It is critical to [Iran's] survival" to strike soon, the official said.

Iran also apparently has been re-supplied with one of its most effective weapons against Iraqi civilian targets: the surface-to-surface missile. Egyptian intelligence officials over the last two years have been counting the devastating missile destruction to Iraqi targets and marking them off against the 30 SCUD-B Soviet-made missiles Iran obtained from Libya along with two missile launchers.

To date, the Egyptians have counted 28 hits, leaving Iran with only two of the original SCUD-B's in its arsenal.

But other intelligence information suggests that Iran has received a fresh supply of U.S.-made Lance surface-to-surface missiles from one of the handful of European allies that buys the Lance from the United States, according to an Egyptian military official.

"With the rate of [missile] firing we are seeing, this indicates they [the Iranians] have more than the 30 missiles," he said.

With 2 million Egyptian workers employed in Iraq and a major military sales program which hit the \$2 billion mark last year, Egypt has a large stake in the outcome of the gulf war. "The Egyptians do not want to see Iraq crumble," said one senior western diplomat.

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Financially, however, Egypt is barely able to pay its own bills, much less contribute to Iraq's war budget. But because Egypt and Iraq have both been large customers for Soviet-made military equipment over many years, the Egyptian military has done a brisk business selling Iraq a wide assortment of munitions, Soviet weapons and spares from aging Egyptian stockpiles, according to sources here. Egypt is replacing those stockpiles with new U.S.-made weapons.